

# YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

## The Oberlin Connection



APRIL 15 to JUNE 15, 1987

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F. V. Hayden, The Yellowstone National Park . . . Boston, L. Prang, 1876.

Cover illustration: Thomas Moran, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872  
 Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma



The “Summit of the World” was what native Americans called the area that is now Yellowstone National Park. Tales of volcanoes, hot springs, and unbelievable colors were told by the few mountain men who managed to penetrate this vast area’s seemingly insurmountable geographic barriers. But its wonders were not truly known until after the Civil War when the first organized and systematic explorations of the region took place.

Oberlinians played a vital role in these explorations. The first and most historic Yellowstone expeditions were led by Oberlin men: General Henry D. Washburn in 1870, and geologist Ferdinand V. Hayden in 1871. Each of their two parties also included an additional Oberlinian: Warren C. Gillette in 1870, and Professor George N. Allen in 1871.

Henry Washburn (1832-1871) attended Oberlin from 1849-51. He served as a general in the Civil War and later accepted the post of surveyor general for the Montana Territory in the hope that living in the West would help restore his war-ravaged health. Joined by seven Montana businessmen, including Warren Gillette, who had attended the preparatory department of Oberlin College in the 1850s, and accompanied by a military escort, he spent about a month exploring the area around the Yellowstone and Madison Rivers. Although the reports of his expedition were more descriptive than scientific, they received much publicity, including two illustrated articles printed in the May and June 1871 issues of the popular magazine *Scribner’s Monthly*.

The author of these articles, expedition member Nathaniel Langford, lectured widely on his Yellowstone experiences. Among those attending his talk in Washington was Ferdinand Hayden, then head of the U.S. Geological Survey of the Territories. The lecture whetted Hayden’s desire to return to an area he had skirted on a survey twelve years before. He decided to capitalize on the current public interest in the Yellowstone area by asking Congress for funds to explore it officially. Congress obliged by giving Hayden \$40,000 and a free hand to select his assistants for this first “scientific” survey of the Yellowstone Territory.

## FERDINAND VANDEVEER HAYDEN, 1829-1887

Ferdinand Hayden was not perceived by his Oberlin classmates as someone who would lead such a highly organized and arduous geological expedition. Called “Poor Ferd,” he was regarded as “impulsive . . . a dreamer who would never conquer in practical life.” That prediction was put to rest in 1853—three years after his graduation from Oberlin—when Hayden received a medical degree from Albany Medical College. By this time he had developed a deep interest in geology, and joined a series of western surveys that included the Badlands of South Dakota, and the Valley of the Missouri up to Montana. In 1859-60 he explored the region drained by the Yellowstone River, but early snowstorms prevented his party from crossing the Rockies to explore the Yellowstone Territory itself.

By 1871, Ferdinand Hayden was a professor of geology at the University of Pennsylvania. He was as well regarded for his scientific acumen as for his

ability to lobby in Washington on behalf of his popular surveys of the West. Recognizing that western railroad companies and the American public were intensely interested in this wondrous region, Hayden arranged for the photographer William Henry Jackson and the landscape painter Thomas Moran to accompany the survey party. Their work provided eager audiences with accurate visual records of the spectacular scenery. Their extraordinary photographs and paintings also stand today as artistic achievements in their own right.

Hayden's Yellowstone party consisted of about thirty men. Some served as cooks, hunters, and teamsters; others were statisticians, entomologists, and zoologists. Jackson recalled how Hayden was able to bring out the best in this diverse group of men throughout the three-month trip.

"... we had an informal conference around the campfire and then we would set about our work individually, or in groups of two or three . . . Dr. Hayden had the rare compound faculty that enabled him not only to select able assistants but to get all of them to pull together . . . He made every man feel that each little individual side trip was vital to the whole . . ."

One of the party was Hayden's Oberlin friend and professor of geology and natural history, George Allen. Serving as botanist who identified, collected, and pressed flowers and plants, Allen was the oldest of the party at age fifty-nine. The rigors of the first three weeks proved to be too much for Allen and he was unable to continue the journey. Although incomplete, the journal he kept of his experiences provides a rich and detailed account of the beginning of this historic expedition.

The Washburn and Hayden expeditions provided volumes of new information about the Yellowstone Territory and left a lasting impact on the region. Their surveys provided reliable maps and descriptions for the first time, and were also responsible for naming most of the features and landmarks we identify with the area today, such as Old Faithful, Mount Washburn, and Hayden Valley. The 1871 survey was important for its scientific interpretation of the region's geology and catalog of its minerals, flora, and fauna.

Even more significant was the wealth of visual documentary evidence provided by the paintings and photographs of Moran and Jackson which Hayden used to bolster his own arguments before Congress to designate Yellowstone as the first national park. The widespread public interest aroused by published accounts of the 1870 and 1871 expeditions had laid a good foundation and the bill passed easily in 1872.



F. V. Hayden in the field.



## THOMAS MORAN, 1837-1926

The 1871 Yellowstone expedition was a turning point in the career of Thomas Moran. The experience so profoundly impressed him that he later said its effect would “remain . . . as long as memory lasts.” He continued to explore the West after the 1871 trip, making eight journeys there between 1871 and 1892. His field sketches, often marked with notes on color, were used again and again to produce his finished oils and watercolors.

Moran was born in England but emigrated to the United States with his family in 1844, settling in Philadelphia. He was apprenticed to the engraving firm of Scattergood and Telfer, where he learned the discipline and precision evident in his drawings. Although he became increasingly interested in watercolor, he continued to produce engravings for illustrations.



Thomas Moran

One such assignment was the preparation of engravings for the 1871 articles on Yellowstone in *Scribner's Monthly*, which Moran based on rough field sketches made by members of the 1870 Washburn expedition.

When Moran learned of the plans for Hayden's 1871 expedition, he asked to be included, wishing to see in person the area that he had recently illustrated. He financed his trip by borrowing money from Jay Cooke, the railroad tycoon, and *Scribner's*, leaving a painting with each as collateral and promising watercolors upon his return. He then embarked on the long difficult journey—his first wilderness experience and his first occasion to ride a horse.

While the Hayden party explored, Moran made on-site sketches, “so carefully drawn that a geologist could determine their precise nature.” He often consulted with Jackson in selecting the most scenic viewpoint, sometimes ignoring safety to obtain a more dramatic perspective. Color was added either at the time he made the sketch or in camp, according to his notations. Moran was dazzled by the actual colors of the Yellowstone landscape, describing them as “beyond the reach of human art.”

Later in his studio, Moran utilized Jackson's photographs along with his own sketches for inspiration in creating his finished watercolors and oils. These finished pieces were not literal transcriptions; rather, they were idealized scenes drawn from Moran's sketches which “preserve[d] and convey[ed] its [Yellowstone's] impression.” Although the accuracy of the landscape was never ignored (Moran was quite sensitive to the scientific research being conducted by the Hayden party), the overall visual impression created by the dramatic terrain was heightened in his studio works.

The watercolors on exhibition from the Gilcrease Institute (with the exception of the field sketch *In Lower Madison Cañon*), were commissioned by the British industrialist William Blackmore. Blackmore had seen Moran's field sketches when they were displayed for members of Congress in 1871-72, and was so impressed by them that he commissioned a set of sixteen for himself.

Thomas Moran's interest in Yellowstone was so deep that he often referred to himself as T. "Yellowstone" Moran and used the monogram "TYM" in signing his works. But Moran also left his own mark on the area's nomenclature: Moran Point, Mount Moran, and Moran Canyon were all named in his honor. His great achievement was the encapsulation of that vast, extraordinary terrain into images comprehensible, delicately rendered, yet always emphasizing the power of natural phenomena.

### WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON, 1843-1942

Compared to Thomas Moran, William Henry Jackson was a seasoned wilderness traveler. Not only had he accompanied a Hayden Survey in 1870 to the Wyoming Territory, but he had been a bullwhacker on a wagon train, had driven wild horses from California to Colorado, and had done photography for the transcontinental railroad companies.

His work on the 1870 Wyoming expedition was impressive enough to secure for him a paid year-round government position as photographer for the U.S. Geological Survey. He worked for the Hayden Surveys for several years, taking negatives in the field in the summer and producing prints during the winter months in Washington, D.C.

Photography in the 1870s was a cumbersome procedure, as is evident from Jackson's description:



W. H. Jackson

"My equipment . . . was . . . the double barrelled stereo, the 8x10, the 6½ x 8½ (also adaptable to stereoscopic work); the portable dark room . . . a full stock of chemicals and enough glass for 400 plates."

This paraphernalia, which weighed over 300 pounds, had to be carried on a mule.

At that time the only way to make a negative was to wet a glass plate with chemicals just before an exposure was made. After exposure the plate had to be quickly developed in the dark before it dried out. A dark box, needed for



developing, was very heavy and hard to move from place to place. At Tower Creek

"... where that stream drops into the gorge the view is magnificent—but rendering it on a glass plate from the bed beneath turned out to be my biggest problem of the year... Getting the heavy dark box within working distance... couldn't be done... [So] after setting up and focussing my camera at the bottom of the gorge, I would prepare a plate, back the holder with wet blotting paper, then slip and slide and tumble down to my camera and make the exposure. After taking my picture, I had to climb to the top carrying the exposed plate wrapped in a moist towel. With help... I succeeded in repeating the procedure four or five times."

The negative plates were very large, by our standards, because it was extremely difficult to print larger than the negative, so if one wanted an 8x10 picture, one had to make an 8x10 negative. Stereoscopic views were all the rage and the stereoscopic double-barrelled camera to which Jackson referred, was used to take two pictures simultaneously, side by side, a few inches apart so that when the prints were mounted on a board and viewed through a stereopticon, miraculous three-dimensional vistas appeared.

Jackson was the first person to photograph successfully and publish views of the amazing Yellowstone scenery and his 8x10 prints were widely distributed to members of Congress and to the press. They served as the basis for illustrations in the official report of the 1871 Survey as well as in articles in magazines such as *Scribner's*.

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Because of Oberlin's connection with the Yellowstone explorations, the College has a number of early published accounts and personal documents relating to the surveys, including letters, journals, and field notes.

One of the letters on exhibit is from Hayden to Professor Allen written at the end of the 1871 survey. In it Hayden speaks of the sorrow he feels for anyone who "must leave the world without having his eyes fed with the grand vision of this great west." Generations of Americans have enjoyed that grand vision thanks to Hayden's leadership and the artistry of Thomas Moran and William Henry Jackson.

Oberlin men were central and crucial to the early exploration of the Yellowstone National Park, hence YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK: THE OBERLIN CONNECTION.

Marlene Deahl Merrill  
Affiliate Scholar, Oberlin College  
Kimberlie L. Gumz  
Registrar, Allen Memorial Art Museum  
Dina B. Schoonmaker  
Curator, Special Collections, Oberlin College Library



Thomas Moran at Mammoth Hot Springs. Photograph by W. H. Jackson

## CURATORS OF THE EXHIBIT:

Larry Feinberg, Chief Curator, Allen Memorial Art Museum

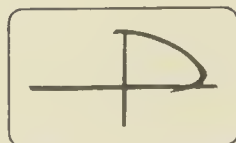
Marlene Deahl Merrill, Affiliate Scholar, Oberlin College

Dina B. Schoonmaker, Curator of Special Collections, Oberlin College Library

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